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Napoli's Soccer Soft Power: Shaping Italy's Image and Economy ^[1]

Soccer is a global spectacle, with a turnover exceeding the GNP of many countries. The World Cup final is the most watched event on Earth (1.5 billion in 2022).

The sport has been widely seen as an instrument of soft power, particularly since 1930, after the creation of the Rimet World Cup for national teams. International cups for clubs were then established in the 1950's in Europe and Latin America. In 2007, a world championship for clubs was created. In the past decade, China, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Russia have invested heavily in soccer for geopolitical purposes both at home and abroad. Morocco has used soccer as a key tool in its strategy to assert its African leadership.

Soccer can be used as an instrument of soft power by states. Nevertheless, private stakeholders that pursue economic interests may also promote rooted cultural values that are not necessarily aligned with the national narrative. Società Sportiva Calcio Napoli serves as an emblematic case study of effective achievement of economic and soft power objectives in Italy and Europe.

The Naples city soccer team was founded in 1926 within the process of creating a single national league, Serie A. This league has been dominated for nearly a hundred years by teams from the North, the expression of an established industrial economic context. Teams from the Center-South, linked to poorer territories, have always played a minor role, reflecting the Italian socio-cultural dynamics born out of the country's unification process in 1860.

Napoli won two Italian championships and a European cup between 1987 and 1990, after a full sixty years since its founding. These victories were hailed by Neapolitans and the national media as a "redemption" of the city and of its economic and social subalternity to the North.

After the brief interlude of success, the Napoli club experienced a long financial and sporting decline that led to the club's bankruptcy in 2004. The club was then bought by Aurelio De Laurentiis, heir to a dynasty of Neapolitan-born film producers active between Cinecittà and Hollywood.

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The arrival of De Laurentiis marked a revolution in Italian soccer. For although Italian soccer clubs became for-profit companies in 1981, the majority of professionals involved in soccer still did not have sufficient managerial skills in 2000. This situation resulted, as in other European countries, in a crisis in the sustainability of the sport due to heavy indebtedness. De Laurentiis, a successful entrepreneur, introduced management and communication concepts borrowed from the world of cinema, including managing image rights, expanding the number of sponsors, and articulating termination clauses.

The sporting results he achieved are solid. In three years, he brought the team back from the third to the first division. Since then, Napoli has been consistently at the top of the Italian League and European Cups, the only Italian team to participate in them for fourteen consecutive years. Even more important are the results achieved from the management point of view. The club became a model of soccer sustainability throughout Europe because of its shrewd management. It obtained significant profits and business growth, with zero debt, while at the same time, attaining notable sports achievements, eventually winning its third championship in 2023.

The De Laurentiis model drew the attention of the business world and the media, which rediscovered a collective culture of the city made up of dynamism, efficiency, projection to the future, and lively communication. Starting with the contribution of small local brands, De Laurentiis gradually attracted some of the most coveted international sponsors, such as Amazon, Armani, Konami, MSC, UPbit, and Socios. The consecration came in 2022 when Coca Cola decided to associate its brand with Napoli's, definitively crowning the corporate identity of the club but also of the city.

The postmodern consumer tribe of Napoli fans worldwide, in 2017, already amounted to 35 million fans and 120 million sympathizers, distributed as follows: 4.6 million fans in Italy, 7.2 in the United States, 5.1 in Brazil, and 1.4 in Argentina. As many as 17.4 million sympathizers out of 120 million were in the United States. Napoli's sympathizers in China were also growing strongly, estimated at about 18 million (Nielsen 2017 report). Winning the 2023 championship further boosted these figures.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the communicative growth process of the Napoli brand has been the effective synthesis between a strongly territorial and somewhat archaic identity and the inevitable commodification of globalized soccer. This phenomenon was possible by starting the expansion from the network of the Neapolitan and Italian diaspora around the world.

In addition, Napoli soccer, accepting the request of 74 percent of Italian fans asking football clubs to promote sustainable practices (Deloitte Football Fan Experience 2023 and 2024 ) , has long implemented actions for environmental sustainability, social inclusion and gender equality.

Thanks in part to the Napoli soccer club, over the course of two decades, negative stereotypes about the city--born within the nineteenth-century national culture--were first challenged by positive ones, and then, overturned by the success of the Napoli model.

In turn, between 2004 and 2024, there was a rediscovery of Naples by foreign investors, especially high-tech companies. For example, in 2016, Apple opened in Naples the first center in Europe

for app development, in collaboration with the local university. Microsoft followed in 2023, while Amazon made Naples the main hub in the Center-South of Italy. In 2024, the Saudi Business Council launched a vast new investment plan in the area.

The city's tourism industry is also booming. In 2018, Naples was ranked 40th among the most visited cities in the world, with 3.7 million visitors (Mastercard/Euromonitor); by 2024 there were 14.5 million, with annual increases of 33 percent in 2022 and 15 percent in 2023 (Visit Italy/Isnart), when Naples surpassed Venice and was third in Italy after Rome and Milan.

The effectiveness of the soft power action accompanying the corporate venture of SSC Napoli between 2004 and 2024 has achieved two main objectives. At the domestic level, it helped to positively revitalize the identity awareness and self-esteem of Neapolitans, now widely acknowledged in the media, overturning stratified negative cultural stereotypes.

Internationally, the team's success has boosted the economy of the entire area, creating a strongly positive sentiment toward it by the foreign public and investors. Moreover, these goals, though territorial, have benefited Italy as a whole, helping to increase indicators of national economic and cultural attractiveness.
